

## Silent Cinema and its Pioneers (1906–1930)

- 1 *El ciego de aldea* (Ángel García Cardona, 1906)
- 2 *Amor que mata* (Fructuós Gelabert, 1909)
- 3 *Don Pedro el Cruel* (Ricardo Baños, Albert Marro, 1911)
- 4 *La aldea maldita* (Florián Rey, 1930)

### Historical and Political Overview of the Period

Spanish silent film history is a tale of lost patrimony and its ghostly remnants. The number of lost and destroyed films is astonishing; only 10 percent of pre-Civil War (1936) films remain in existence. The advent of sound films in the early 1930s rendered silent film technologically obsolete. Additionally, due to the chemical value of the celluloid, countless silent film negatives simply became “raw material in the manufacture of combs, buttons, and sequins” (Gubern, “Precariedad y originalidad del modelo cinematográfico español,” p. 12). The scarcity of records and reliable data on early Spanish cinema considerably hinders the reconstruction of a consistent historic outline. Histories of Spanish silent film are written in a speculative manner, based not on the films themselves, but on secondary sources such as popular film journals of the period, anecdotal testimonies of film professionals and critics, or early critical works on the subject.<sup>5</sup> Given this context it is not surprising to find contradictory and multiple periodizations for this early era. While some film historians and histories focus predominantly on silent pioneers and the genres they worked in, others cite the Barcelona/Madrid dichotomy or the industrial weakness of the incipient Spanish film industry. This introduction briefly outlines the most significant features of silent Spanish cinema, including pertinent historical and political background, while bearing in mind the complexities of the period.

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The era in which cinema was introduced and consolidated corresponds to a turbulent period in Spanish history, marked by intricate political and economic upheavals. The first moving pictures were seen in Spain in 1896, just two years before the country's defeat in the colonial wars that would result in the loss of the final remnants of its empire (Cuba, Puerto Rico, the Philippines, and Guam). It is significant that the arrival of cinema, a medium of modernity, coincided with a traumatic colonial loss symbolic of Spain's crisis of modernity – a crisis that would only continue to intensify.<sup>6</sup>

In 1896 Spain was a constitutional monarchy. After King Alfonso XII died at the age of 28 in 1885, the throne was occupied by his widow María Cristina of Habsburg (the archduchess of Austria), whose reign lasted until her son Alfonso XIII, known as *el hijo póstumo* or “the posthumous son,” ascended to the throne in November of 1902. The regime of this period, known as the Restoration regime, was comprised of two political parties: the liberals (Sagasta) and the conservatives (Cánovas de Castillo). Under King Alfonso XIII, Spain remained officially neutral during World War I (1914–18). However, the political and economic crisis that had already been felt during Alfonso XII's reign progressively intensified. In an attempt to ensure social and political order, Alfonso XIII supported the military dictatorship of Miguel Primo de Rivera, which lasted from 1923 until 1930. Nevertheless, the monarchy did not survive. A civil uprising culminated in Primo de Rivera's fall. In 1931 general elections resulted in the abdication of Alfonso XIII and the proclamation of the Second Republic (1931–6).

As this brief history illustrates, the first moving pictures in Spain were projected against a volatile social and economic backdrop. In addition to governmental instability and the widespread fear of military takeovers, some of the most problematic issues were uneven industrialization and urbanization, poverty, the exploitation of peasants by the landed oligarchy, the offsetting of war debts with tax increases, fear of working-class movements and unrest, and the need for educational reforms. When the first Cinématographe arrived, Spain was an agrarian state. Peasants comprised the majority of the population, while 35 percent of the active population worked in agriculture. Only a small minority of Spaniards lived in cities with more than 100,000 inhabitants (Madrid 540,000; Barcelona 533,000; Valencia 203,000). The illiteracy rate was remarkably high; 60 percent of the population could not read or write at the turn of the century.<sup>7</sup>

The development of cinema in general, and of Spain's in particular, was drastically influenced by economic and technological factors. Cinema as a popular art and a form of entertainment was tied to technological advances

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that were crucial to film recording and projection. Captivating optical illusions were inseparable from the complex mechanics of movement that enabled them. Cinema, a kingdom of illusion and shadows, was bound to its contiguous material reality. It was an artistic product as much as a commercial one. The inseparability of economics, institutional aspects, technology, and aesthetics is noteworthy in Spain, a country fraught with poverty and underdevelopment. Nevertheless, despite the country's lack of political and economic progress, Spain's cinematic history reflects larger patterns in the expansion of the seventh art – those of more advanced industrial societies.

Optical and mechanical apparatuses that were circulating, competing, and participating in the evolution of the moving image – the Thaumatrope, Phenakistoscope, Stroboscope, Zoetrope, Praxinoscope, Chromatrope, Eidotrope, and Cycloidotrope among others – made their way to Spain as well. Spanish film beginnings can be traced back as early as 1896, the year Spain held a competition between the Animatograph (Robert William Paul) and the Lumière Cinématographe. The royal family professed their preference for the Lumière Cinématographe, represented in Spain by Alexandre Promio. He expanded his activities in Spain and in June of 1896 filmed *Plaza del puerto en Barcelona*, acknowledged as the first film actually made in Spain. The Lumière brothers, Louis and Auguste, were thus as triumphant in Spain as in their native France, where they are credited with the “birth” of cinema on December 29, 1895.

The Lumière brothers had a direct impact on the beginnings of film in Spain, where French cinema's pioneering patterns of filming and production were being replicated. Similar themes and genres, such as *actualités* (short documentaries), screen gags, and short comic films, abounded. Because of the Lumière's expansionist politics, their cameramen were scattered around the world filming *le catalogue de vues Lumière*: a catalogue of general, military, comic, and scenic views. This collection of picturesque panoramas was precisely what Alexandre Promio was filming in Spain. In addition to the aforementioned *Plaza del puerto en Barcelona*, Promio's *vistas españolas* – *Llegada de los toreros*, *Maniobras de la artillería en Vicálvaro*, and *Salida de las alumnas del colegio de San Luis de los Franceses* – were the first moving images taken in Spain.

Spanish nationals were as involved as foreigners were in this turn-of-the-century filming frenzy. In October of 1896 Eduardo Jimeno Correas shot the “first” Spanish film, *Salida de la misa de doce del Pilar de Zaragoza*. There were also numerous other *salidas de/llegadas a* (leaving from/arriving at) in the Lumières' hyperrealist style, such as *Llegada de un tren de Teruel*

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*a Segorbe*, an anonymous film shown in Valencia in September of 1896. Therefore, as in other countries, workers leaving factories and trains thundering toward the camera were some of the images that thrilled Spain's first moviegoers. Several chronicles of Spanish film history emphasize that the train, an icon of the Industrial Revolution, has been outnumbered as a cinematic subject by the church. This gesture highlights Spain's adherence to traditional, pre-modern imagery over symbols of industrial progress.

A look at the figures and technology integral to Spain's early film history highlights the technical, national, and aesthetic crossovers characteristic of film culture and exposes the fragile boundaries between foreign influences and national "origins," between colonization and co-productions. The silent period pioneers – the innovators, experimenters, visionaries, nationalists, internationalists, and foreigners – were as diverse as the medium itself. While several figures had radical proposals and projects, many others were conservative, formulaic, and conventional; some were successful, while others were ruined in the enterprise; some were seeking a lucrative commercial enterprise, while others were carried away by technology, science, and the invention of machines; and while some people received belated recognition, many others encountered oblivion. Fructuós Gelabert, Ricardo Baños, Albert Marro, Joan María Codina, Ángel García Cardona, and Adrià Gual are just a handful of the pioneers that should be recognized as important figures in the development of early Spanish cinema. With more than 500 films, one of the most brilliant, innovative, and prolific of the early pioneers was Barcelona-based Segundo de Chomón. He was a master of illusion and the creator of technically adventurous masterpieces whose innovations in cinematic special effects brought him international fame.

This chapter includes three films from this period: Ángel García Cardona's *El ciego de aldea* (1906), Fructuós Gelabert's *Amor que mata* (1909), and Ricardo Baños and Albert Marro's *Don Pedro el Cruel* (1911). These films are part of the creation of "the preliminary industrial and expressive framework for Spain's budding cinema" (Pérez Perucha, "Narración de un aciago destino (1896–1930)," p. 35). These filmmakers' trajectories reflect a collective cinematic drive, illustrating most of the traits that marked filming, production, and distribution in early "silent" Spain. *El ciego de aldea*, directed by Ángel García Cardona, is representative of Films Cuesta and its thriving production activities in Valencia; *Amor que mata* was filmed by Fructuós Gelabert, the director of the first fiction film in Spain; and *Don Pedro el Cruel* is representative of the successful and profitable Hispano Films run by Ricardo Baños and Albert Marro.

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These films were also characteristic of the larger aesthetic, formal, economic, and political trends of early cinema. In addition to displaying noteworthy technical traits and tendencies of “primitive” cinematic expression, these three films also point to the exploration and rethinking of national themes and Spanish cultural identity. *El ciego de aldea*, with its central blind character, originates from a long Spanish literary tradition by incorporating a popular theme of orally transmitted ballads such as *Romance del cordel*. Popular melodramas and successful theatrical works were frequently adapted for the silent screen, *Amor que mata* being one of the most representative. This film also reflects cinema’s search for a more “sophisticated” audience who may have been tired of the usual vaudeville acts and comic chases. Filmmakers therefore embraced the theatrical model in an attempt to attract the theater-going middle class to the cinema by increasing its aesthetic and intellectual appeal. As can be seen from *Amor que mata* with its papier-mâché and plaster sets, the film frame functioned as a proscenium arch,<sup>8</sup> contributing a highly theatrical feel to the productions. The film also illustrates the discrepancies and tensions between the two dramatic forms; the actors perform with archaic facial grimaces inherited from the theater as they also develop new acting styles and conventions particular to the movie screen. Finally, *Don Pedro el Cruel* is a historical drama of monarchic betrayal and succession, a *mise-en-scène* of the nation’s history and its moments of tension and conflict. The film is contemporary with lavishly produced Italian historical costume films such as Giovanni Pastrone’s *Giulio Cesare* (1909) and *La caduta di Troia* (1910), or Enrico Guazzoni’s *Bruto* (1910). While *Don Pedro el Cruel* does not share the extravagance and grandeur of its Italian counterparts, it still fits the trend of historical cinematic superproductions.

*El ciego de aldea*, *Amor que mata*, and *Don Pedro el Cruel* enable us to better understand the early politics of film production in Spain. We see a burgeoning industry whose financial mechanisms required caution, and the subordination of creativity to profits. In the Spanish milieu this meant supporting more creative, risky, and original projects with cheap formulaic ones such as inexpensive newsreels, cheap comic flicks, and familiar literary adaptations. Furthermore, as we can perceive from these films and as Marvin D’Lugo points out: “On the one hand, Spanish film innovators struggled to harness the artistic and commercial potential of the rapidly evolving technology of film as an international mass medium; on the other, artists and commercial promoters of Spanish cinema, as well as early audiences, tended to see in the motion picture the reflection of local and national culture” (*A Guide to the Cinema of Spain*, p. 1).

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*Don Pedro el Cruel* coincides with the end of the first silent period, also known as *un prolongado pionerismo* or “a prolonged pioneer period,” encompassing the years between 1897 and 1910–13 (Pérez Perucha, “Narración de un aciago destino (1896–1930),” p. 25). According to several film historians, this prolonged early period would account for the relatively slow development of Spain’s film industry and infrastructure. Its inadequacies also set the framework for Spanish film production’s future economic, political, and aesthetic dependency on other more powerful film industries.

Most of the filmmakers discussed so far – Marro, Chomón, Gelabert, and Baños – worked and filmed in Barcelona. Neighboring Valencia also boasted significant film production, especially Antonio Cuesta’s company Films Cuesta. Barcelona’s dominance as the most important and powerful film center was indebted to Catalonia’s industrial superiority to the rest of the country. Nevertheless, even industrialized Barcelona could not keep up with growing foreign competition. The situation deteriorated further, mostly due to the increasing weaknesses in the film industry’s infrastructure. Spain’s early cinematic trajectory, the years between 1911 and 1922, can be seen, as Pérez Perucha says, as the “apogee and decline of Barcelona’s production” (“Narración de un aciago destino (1896–1930),” p. 47). The slow but steady decline brought on an irreversible crisis that finally resulted in the end of Catalan silent film production.

This “pre-history” of Spanish silent cinema is marked by Madrid’s absence, which can be tied to the capital city’s idiosyncratic entertainment history. Across the globe, early cinema competed with other entertainment spectacles that it progressively displaced, such as vaudeville acts or shadow melodramas. Madrid, however, had a solid tradition of following the “native” genres: *el sainete* (short comic play), *la zarzuela* (musical theater), and the bullfighting spectacle. Enjoying great popularity among Madrid audiences, these popular forms of entertainment were only gradually displaced, mostly once an unanticipated theater crisis coincided with the increasing infiltration of American and European films into Spain.

Once Madrid embraced filmgoing and filmmaking, among some of the most important personalities of its budding film industry was Benito Perojo, a producer, cameraman, director, screenwriter, and actor. In 1915, Perojo, together with his brother José, established the prominent Patria Films. Antonio Martínez (more widely known as Florián Rey, the pseudonym he later adopted), another actor and later an important director, also contributed to Madrid’s emergence and consolidation on the peninsular cinematographic scene.

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Political factors intensified the peculiar economic, technological, and cinematic differences between Barcelona and Madrid. The capital's belated but powerful rise to primacy as a film center corresponded to the military dictatorship of Miguel Primo de Rivera and his centralizing tendencies. By the same token, Primo de Rivera's ascent to power in 1923 signaled Barcelona's descent as an important film hub. However, these inner dynamics, industrial power shifts, and domestic rivalries obscured the actual competition that threatened national Spanish cinema from the outside. The principal foreign competitors were French monopolies, dominating until World War I, followed by the United States, especially during its international expansion (1907–18). Around the world, cinema was transformed from a risky commercial venture to a full-scale industry and a lucrative commercial enterprise. However, unlike elsewhere, in Spain early "cinematic craftsmanship" did not evolve into a powerful industry. Spanish production lacked modern studios, a sophisticated star system, and significant investment in competing technologies. The problem was further exacerbated by a lack of originality, evidenced by the overuse of tired themes and formulas that were, as Pérez Perucha argues, fundamentally influenced by, when not literal copies of, foreign styles ("Narración de un aciago destino (1896–1930)," p. 54).

The first sound films were screened in Spain on September 19, 1929, in Barcelona and on October 4 of the same year in Madrid. These films were, for the most part, shown silently due to their technological incompatibility with exhibition halls and their existing equipment. Only fragments of films were sonorized, such as Maurice Chevalier's singing in *Innocents of Paris/La canción de París*.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, as Pérez Perucha colorfully writes, "the arrival of sound cinema mercilessly liquidated Spain's fragile cinema" ("Narración de un aciago destino (1896–1930)," p. 105). Some final noteworthy films made during this period of crisis and decline are: *La hermana San Sulpicio* (directed by Florián Rey and with the first appearance of future film star Imperio Argentina), *Una aventura de cine* (Juan de Orduña), *Es mi hombre* (Carlos Fernández Cuenca), all made in 1927; *Agustina de Aragón* (Florián Rey) in 1928; and in 1929, *El sexto sentido* (Nemesio M. Sobrevila) and *El gordo de Navidad* (Fernando Delgado). Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí's *Un chien andalou* was filmed in 1929 in France.

Florián Rey's classic melodrama *La aldea maldita* (1930) is the last film featured in this chapter. The film is considered to be the last great silent epic of Spanish cinema. It centers on Castilian peasants' strong ties to the land, misery, poverty, urban migration, and clashes between tradition and

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modernity. The film probes questions of honor codes, sexuality, gender relations, emigration, and race, themes favored by the director and explored further in his later films, such as the well-known *Nobleza baturra* (1935). In *La aldea maldita* Florián Rey ties the moral “corruption” of women to threats posed to crumbling patriarchal structures. The issue is problematized through the central figure of the “fallen” mother. In addition to these socio-moral issues, the film also has significant visual appeal and was influenced by Soviet expressionism.<sup>10</sup> As Marsha Kinder notes, “the forces of change are associated with the uniqueness of the cinematic spectacle” (*Blood Cinema*, p. 45). The film effectively couples a strong conservative message with striking visual beauty.

In sum, although the infrastructure of Spain’s film industry nearly collapsed, there were several figures that reappeared and surfaced from this disintegration. Many of them were from the Madrid milieu including the aforementioned Benito Perojo, a filmmaker who very successfully depicted the urban middle class, Florián Rey, the director of *La aldea maldita*, and Luis Buñuel, whose prolific career, as we will see in the next chapter, was also marked by the silent screen.

### 1 *El ciego de aldea* (Ángel García Cardona, 1906)

#### Context<sup>11</sup>

##### *Production credits*<sup>12</sup>

Director: Ángel García Cardona  
 Production: Films Cuesta (Valencia); Joan María Codina  
 Cinematography: Ángel García Cardona  
 Screenplay: Antonio Cuesta  
 Genre: Drama, 35 mm, black and white, silent  
 Country: Spain  
 Runtime: 75 minutes

##### *Synopsis*

In Godella, a town in Valencia, a blind beggar and his granddaughter solicit money in the street. First they encounter a group of sinister bandits who



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refuse to help them, but then have better luck with a generous wealthy couple. In a horse-drawn carriage, the newlyweds pass by a dangerous area, where the same gang that refused to give the beggars money attacks the couple and kidnaps the woman. By chance, the blind man and his granddaughter watch hidden as the bandits take the woman into a cave. When the gang leaves, the beggars free the woman. The granddaughter goes in search of the husband, whom she finds accompanied by the Civil Guard. Between them they come up with a plan to ambush the bandits, whom they eventually capture. The newlyweds thank the blind man and his granddaughter for their generous help.

**Film Scenes: Close Readings***Scene 1 The walk to the cave*

In this scene we see the bandits take the woman, her hands and feet bound, inside the cave that serves as their hideout. The little girl and her blind grandfather are also in the scene, hidden in the foreground, while in the background we see the houses of the town. Each aspect of the scene recalls a theatrical staging: from the flat perspective of the horizon and the framing of the scene through a fixed shot, where the blind man and the girl appear on the left and the criminals on the right, to the characters' exaggerated gestures. Through its simple story, the scene shows that the technical resources of the new medium were precarious, and still catering to spectators who were accustomed to the theatrical conventions of the stage. Film was a new art for both the pioneering spectators and producers, and both had to adjust to novel ways of capturing and perceiving moving images on the screen.

**Directors (Life and Works)***Ángel García Cardona and Antonio Cuesta*<sup>13</sup>

Ángel García Cardona directed this film in collaboration with producer Antonio Cuesta, owner of the film production company Films Cuesta, which was first headquartered in Barcelona and then later moved to Valencia.

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In 1899 García Cardona was a recognized and prestigious photographer in Valencia. Because of his interest in the new cinematic medium, that same year he expanded his studio by opening a developing and editing lab, along with a projection room, producing films that included “panoramic views” and documentary reports. In 1901 he dedicated himself full-time to making films, working for various producers and eventually associating himself in 1905 with impresario Antonio Cuesta, of Films Cuesta. This collaboration resulted in the release of the film *Batalla de las flores* in 1905, and one year later of *El ciego de aldea*, which coincided with a boom in movie-theater openings in cities like Valencia and Barcelona. The expansion of film venues indicates how film was gaining popularity as a new medium, not just of art, but of entertainment as well.

## 2 *Amor que mata* (Fructuós Gelabert, 1909)

### Context

#### *Production credits*

Director: Fructuós Gelabert  
Production: Films Barcelona  
Cinematography: Fructuós Gelabert  
Screenplay: Fructuós Gelabert  
Genre: Dramatic comedy, 35 mm, black and white, silent  
Country: Spain  
Runtime: 14 minutes

#### *Cast*

Joaquín Carrasco, José Vives, Guerra (mother), M. Mestres (daughter), María Miró, P. Ortín, L. Mas, Martí, Metas

#### *Synopsis*

Jacobo is set to marry Miss Vélez, but a vengeful woman begins writing anonymous letters saying that they should not marry because Miss Vélez’s

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mother is a “sinner.” Upon reading the anonymous letter, Miss Vélez faints and falls gravely ill. News of Miss Vélez’s sickness appears in the newspaper. After finding out what she has caused, the woman who sent the anonymous letter decides to go the Vélez house. Meanwhile, Jacobo is also worried about his fiancée’s health, so he goes to her house to see her. Upon hearing her mother confess the truth, Miss Vélez suffers one final attack and dies.

**Film Scenes: Close Readings***Scene 1 The fatal faint*

Jacobo goes to his gravely ill fiancée’s house. From her bedroom Miss Vélez hears her mother confess that the allegations of her sinning were true, which causes Miss Vélez to faint and die. At this moment the woman who sent the anonymous letters also enters the scene. Upon seeing Miss Vélez die, the woman exits, as Jacobo and the sinning mother embrace the victim. In this dramatic finale the actors’ highly exaggerated gestures, especially the protagonist’s final faint, show that the theatrical gestures of that time persisted into the cinematic mode of representation. In addition to the staging and the fixed take typical of early film, *Amor que mata* demonstrates other characteristic elements of theatrical works of the time, such as the social importance of morality and decency, and an emphasis on poetic justice. Love, sin, and romantic death were also popular themes of literature and plays of that era. As *Amor que mata* demonstrates, film’s first steps did not stray very far from these tendencies.

**Director (Life and Works)***Fructuós Gelabert (b. Barcelona 1874, d. Barcelona 1955)*

Fructuós Gelabert, who made the first Spanish fiction film, *Riña en un café*, in August of 1897, is a multifaceted filmmaker; he was a camera operator, actor, screenwriter, impresario, and director. Following the conventions of filming segments of “real life” in the style of the Lumière brothers,

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he filmed *Salida de los trabajadores de la fábrica España industrial* in 1897. Among his other outstanding films are: *Procesión de las Hijas de María de la iglesia parroquial de Sants* (1902) and *Los guapos de la vaquería del Parque* (1905). At the same time he filmed documentary reports like *Visita a Barcelona de doña María Cristina y don Alfonso XIII*.

In 1902 Gelabert worked as a tech in the Sala Diorama, the first movie theater in Barcelona. The company that ran the theater, Empresa Diorama, later became the well-known producer Films Barcelona (1906–13). Gelabert was prolific; he made about 11 movies between 1898 and 1906, with titles like *Tierra baja* (1907), *La Dolores* (1910), *María Rosa* (1908) and *Amor que mata* (1909). Gelabert's production started to decline with the advent of sound film. After a period of crisis, his last success was *La puntaire* (1927). He died in Barcelona in 1955, having retired from filmmaking.

### 3 *Don Pedro el Cruel* (Ricardo Baños, Albert Marro, 1911)

#### Context

##### *Production credits*

Directors: Ricardo Baños; Albert de Marro

Production: Hispano Films

Cinematography: Ricardo Baños

Screenplay: Not known

Genre: Historical film, 33335 mm, black and white, silent

Country: Spain

Runtime: Not known

##### *Synopsis*

In the living room of his castle, King Pedro the Cruel receives a message that his three bastard brothers (as the film's script refers to them) are preparing to overthrow him. After an initial moment of sadness, he decides to come up with a plan to take revenge on his brothers. He sends a spy and soldiers to the forest near the castle to try to uncover his brothers' plan. The spy overhears a conversation that the three brothers have in their

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tent, and then races to the castle to inform the king. The king reacts by summoning Don Fadrique, one of his brothers, and imprisoning him. Their mother is left alone in the living room of the castle, crying due to the feud between her children and from the pain of betrayal.

### Film Scenes: Close Readings

#### *Scene 1 The spy in the tent*

King Pedro's three bastard brothers converse in their tent, situated in the middle of the forest near the palace, as a spy very obviously sticks his head into the tent to listen. In the shot we see the brothers discussing the plan to overthrow their brother, and in the center we see the spy's face as he pays close attention to what he's witnessing. All of the characters' exaggerated gestures are in keeping with the obvious presence of the spy, whom they never seem to perceive, giving the scene a more theatrical than filmic feeling. It is important to remember that the facts represented in this pioneering film are actually part of the country's historical reality (the betrayal of King Pedro the Cruel by his three brothers), but the scene, with the aforementioned recourses, seems less like historical reality than a lyrical meditation on it.

### Directors (Life and Works)

*Ricardo Baños (b. Barcelona 1892, d. Barcelona 1939)  
and Albert Marro<sup>14</sup>*

Ricardo Baños is another multifaceted figure from the early days of the Spanish national film scene. He gained exposure to the art of cinema in Paris through Gaumont, a renowned French photography and, later, film production company. He worked in both France and Spain, finally settling down in Barcelona in 1904, where he became instrumental in the creation of the burgeoning Spanish film industry. After this first successful period, Baños met Albert Marro, another filmmaker of the period; together in 1906 they founded Hispano Films, the very successful

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production company that they managed until 1918. Their production centered on low-budget, highly successful films, which allowed them, in turn, to finance more experimental and creative films. Historical films and romantic dramas were prevalent; particularly noteworthy is *Don Juan Tenorio* (1910), the first filmic adaptation of a popular play by José de Zorilla, whose rights were bought by Charles Pathé's powerful French photography/film company.

### Critical Commentary

*El ciego de aldea*, *Amor que mata*, and *Don Pedro el Cruel* are typical of Spain's emerging film culture. *El ciego de la aldea*, directed by Ángel García Cardona, is representative of the productions of the Valencia company Films Cuesta; *Amor que mata* was filmed by Fructuós Gelabert, one of the most significant and innovative figures of the period and the director of Spain's first fiction film; and *Don Pedro el Cruel*, directed by Ricardo Baños and Albert Marro, illustrates the politics of production of the successful Hispano Films. These three films' themes reflect the diverse aesthetic, economic, and political aspects that characterize this early stage of film production and show the tendencies of so-called "primitive" cinematographic expression.

Each film illustrates recurrent traits of early silent cinema. *El ciego de aldea*, with its blind protagonist – a frequent figure in Spanish literature – displays early cinema's reliance on literary tropes and conventions. *Amor que mata* illustrates the prevalence of the adaptation of popular melodramas. Fructuós Gelabert was one of the most prolific and commercial directors and made other famous film adaptations such as *Tierra baja*, *María Rosa*, and the musical *La Dolores*, based on a celebrated zarzuela. *Don Pedro el Cruel* also illustrates how national history was a thematic source for film during this initial period.

These early films suggest that the politics of production took few risks; the priority at that time was commercial success, to the detriment of filmic creativity. Aesthetically, early Spanish film did not stray very far from the forms of its dramatic precursor, theater. Filmmakers relied on familiar genres and themes in an attempt to attract the theater-going audience. Filmmakers also used a theatrical model to construct scenes, which is reflected in the fixed framing, single takes, and static shots that characterize early

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silent films. Furthermore, film actors maintained theater's interpretive conventions, such as exaggerated and melodramatic gesturing. Given the cautious production policies, the cinematic production of this era is limited to films with few pretenses and low budgets, like comedies, fantasies, or documentaries. The three films analyzed in this section are also inscribed within a period of Spanish film history that several film historians define as a "prolonged pioneer phase," covering the years between 1897 and 1913 (Pérez Perucha, "Narración de un aciago destino (1896–1930)," p. 25). Aside from the slow passage from one artistic medium (theater) to another (film), cinematic production was also limited by Spain's political situation, its profound social crisis, and its archaic economic structures.

#### 4 *La aldea maldita* (Florián Rey, 1930)

##### Context and Critical Commentary

###### *Production credits*

Director: Florián Rey  
 Production: Florián Rey; Pedro Larrañaga  
 Cinematography: Alberto Arroyo  
 Screenplay: Florián Rey  
 Score: Rafael Martínez  
 Genre: Melodrama, black and white, silent  
 Country: Spain  
 Runtime: 58 minutes

###### *Cast*

Pedro Larrañaga	Juan de Castilla
Carmen Viance	Acacia
Pilar G. Torres	Fuensantica
Ramón Meca	Uncle Lucas
Víctor Pastor	Abuelo (grandfather)
Antonio Mata	Gañán
Modesto Rivas	Administrator
Amelia Muñoz	Magdalena

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### *Synopsis*

A humble peasant family, including Juan de Castilla, a farm worker, his wife Acacia, their young son, and Juan's father Martín, lives in Luján, a small Castilian town. Due to bad weather, the town loses its crops and the majority of the inhabitants flee in hunger, looking for work in other places. Juan is taken to jail after an altercation with Uncle Lucas, the town loan shark. Magdalena, the family's neighbor, convinces Acacia to look for work in a nearby city, Segovia, where she becomes a prostitute. Martín, her father-in-law, prevents Acacia from taking her young child with her to the city. Later, after Juan is released from jail, he also moves to Segovia, where he finds a comfortable position as the overseer of a farm. There he reunites with Acacia, his wife, who is working in a tavern under dubious auspices. He drags her back to the lucrative farm at which he now lives with his father and his son, holding Acacia captive in the house in an effort to protect the family's honor. Juan also does not allow Acacia to have any contact with her son. Time passes, and Juan's father finally dies. Juan then throws Acacia out of the house in the dead of winter. She wanders aimlessly through the town, physically sick and deranged from the loss of her child, and ends up in a mental hospital. More time passes and the couple reunite in Luján, the cursed town of the title, where Acacia, finally forgiven by Juan, returns to be with her son.

### *Critical commentary*

Considered a masterpiece of Florián Rey, the director, and Spain's final era of silent film, *La aldea maldita* is an "involuntary document of the customs, female condition, and moral conservatism of agrarian Spain" (Gubern, "1930–1936 (II República)," p. 94). The film explores the themes of urban migration, poverty, and the clash between tradition and modernity. In spite of its conservative focus on certain aspects like honor, the subordination of women, or the patriarchal family, the film stands out for its striking visual style, influenced by Russian expressionism, with its close-ups of peasants' faces and its narrative and aesthetic intensity. The director masterfully captures the collective drama of migrant peasants plagued by the universal tragedies of hunger and misery.

*La aldea maldita* juxtaposes the continued presence of Spain's outdated social and cultural structures with the country's budding modernization at



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the advent of the second Republican regime, one of the most progressive of the era. The sinful wife's punishment can thus be seen as illustrative of the oppressiveness of the tyrannical honor system that sustained patriarchal family structures in Spain. This thematic tendency is reminiscent of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Spanish Golden Age theater, which is rife with similar tragedies of honor. Through its melodramatic overtones Florián Rey's film probes the implications of the persistence of this honor system. It also vividly evokes certain idiosyncratic Spanish elements, like the harshness of the rural space, the sober environment, and the peasants' austere existence.

The director masterfully utilizes the visual resources of the new medium, making dramatic use of light and shadows, and varying his shot composition by juxtaposing extreme, personalized close-ups of human faces with harsh landscapes, the movement of the crowd in the scene showing the peasants' mass exodus, and the bustling, modern city street scenes. These innovative techniques made *La aldea maldita* one of the first masterpieces of early Spanish cinema, and strongly influenced the burgeoning art form. Furthermore, the tragedy of rural migration that *La aldea maldita* introduced to the film screen became an essential reference for later Spanish film production.

### Film Scenes: Close Readings

#### *Scene 1 The exodus of the carts*

The inhabitants of Luján, the cursed town, decide to abandon their homes when faced with the threat of starvation after a violent storm destroys all of their crops. Florián Rey's noteworthy establishing shot, which captures the village as hundreds of carts descend a serpentine path down the hill as they leave the town, is juxtaposed with alternating close-up shots of the peasants' faces. The aesthetic composition of this sequence of collective emigration communicates the intensity and drama of the moment, just as it shows the filmmaker's talent for using long shots that can encompass a large quantity of actors. The mass migration depicted on screen captures a historical moment that reflects the profound economic crisis Spain was experiencing at the time, in which agricultural devastation in particular provoked the abandonment of the towns and the growth of the urban

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population. This shot of the exodus of the carts also demonstrates how Rey, through his mastery of the new medium, was able to break with other directors' dependence on theatrical techniques and create a more specialized filmic language.

### *Scene 2 The city on the other side of the sierra*

In order to convince Acacia to leave the town, Magdalena tells her “you doubt, because you don't know what's on the other side of the sierra.” This statement is illustrated by consecutive shots of bustling city streets, the accelerated tempo of cars in motion, people walking, and the architecture of the city. The city's modernity is contrasted with the rural Castilian environment, sober and oppressive, that predominates the rest of the film. This “other side of the sierra” is understood as the symbolic border that separates two Spains: the rural, anchored in the archaic atavism of honor, patriarchy, and the fight for daily subsistence; and the urban, which is modern, vital, anonymous, and presented as the hope for the future. Rey's intricate and complex montage strategies show his mastery of filmic language, not only in terms of camera work, but also in respect of the conceptual production of meaning; the city symbolizes a utopian modern space that gives hope to those who are trying to escape the oppression of the cursed town.



**Figure 1.1** The city on the other side of the sierra (*La aldea maldita*, 1930)

*Scene 3 The Calderonian shadow*<sup>15</sup>

When Juan discovers Acacia working in a tavern, he forces her to return with him to the cursed town, but only after making her change into the clothes she used to wear when she lived there. Acacia appears scared and ashamed as she emerges from behind the dressing curtains in her peasant clothes, as a threatening shadow – Juan’s judgmental profile – looms to the right of the screen. Rey seems to suggest that the silhouette that subjugates Acacia is symbolic of the suppression of the peasant woman before the patriarchal power exercised in Spain’s rural atmosphere. The codes of honor and morality alluded to in this scene keep the woman in a position of absolute submission before the patriarchal figure. Rey’s expressionistic looming shadow illustrates his command of visual cinematic language, but also situates the film within Spain’s historical and artist context, recalling Calderonian dramas with their exploration of themes of honor, jealousy, love, forgiveness, moral decline, and the rigidity of class structures.

The scene thus critiques the rural Spanish system of values by creating empathy for Acacia’s fragility and her forced submission to Juan. The actors evoke feeling in the spectators without resorting to the exaggerated gesticulation that is so typical of the heavily theater-influenced early films. In this way, Spanish film begins to develop its own language.

**Director (Life and Works)**

*Florián Rey (Antonio Martínez de Castillo) (b. La Almunia de Doña Godina, Zaragoza, 1894, d. Alicante 1962)*

Florián Rey, whose real name was Antonio Martínez de Castillo, was born in 1894 in the small village of La Almunia de Doña Godina, in Zaragoza. After abandoning a career in law in 1910, he began to work as a journalist for various daily papers in Zaragoza and Madrid, where he started using the pseudonym that would accompany him throughout the rest of his career. His first contact with film was as an actor. After a brief involvement in Madrid’s theater scene, he got a role in the film *La inaccesible* (José Buchs, 1920). Soon thereafter, he ventured into filmmaking and directed his first film, *La revoltosa* (1924), an adaptation of a popular *zarzuela* that quickly became a success. The following year he released another *zarzuela* adaptation called *Gigantes y cabezudos*.

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In 1927 Rey introduced the celebrated singer Imperio Argentina to the screen in his film *La hermana San Sulpicio*, of which he released a sound version in 1934. The next year Imperio Argentina and Florián Rey were married, and together they contributed to the success of the production company CIFESA (Compañía Industrial Film Española S.A.), which made numerous commercially successful films in that era by teaming up popular actors and singers with successful directors of the time.

In 1930 Rey directed *La aldea maldita*, a masterpiece of Spanish silent film, and the first filmic work to be screened internationally. In 1933 he released his first sound film, *Sierra de Ronda*, which sparked a trend of commercial films based on popular culture themes that would last throughout the Second Republic (1931–6). After directing hit titles like *Nobleza baturra* (1935) and *Morena clara* (1936), starring Imperio Argentina, Rey then ventured into *costumbrista*<sup>16</sup> cinema based on folklore and popular Spanish myths. These works formed part of the so-called Golden Age of Spanish cinema that even managed to compete with Hollywood movies in terms of garnering a public following.

After the start of the Spanish Civil War, Florián Rey and Imperio Argentina filmed two movies in Berlin: *Carmen la de Triana* (1938) and *La canción de Aixa* (1939), which were also extremely popular. However, 1939 also saw the couple's divorce and the beginning of Rey's decline as a director. Upon returning to Spain, Rey released what would be his last big hit, *La Dolores* (1940), starring the celebrated couplet singer Concha Piquer. His final successes were *Brindis a Manolete* (1948) and *Cuentos de La Alambra* (1950). He made his last film, *Polvorilla*, in 1956 and died shortly thereafter, in 1962, in Alicante.